Take heart, I have overcome the world

Ordination of Paschal Okpon

Paschal, I recently received a handwritten letter from you. It began by saying that in presenting your petition for ordination to the priesthood, you testify “upon oath” that you are “not compelled by any coercion, force or fear to receive the sacred order” but that you desire it of your own free accord and that you wish to receive it with full and free deliberation believing that you are called by God.

The Church here in Tasmania, as I do myself, joyfully receives your petition to be a priest, and warmly welcomes you among us, now to serve the spiritual needs of the people.

You are doing this, though, in uncertain times. The Church and the society are caught in a dynamic of significant change. The sands are shifting around us. As you embrace the call to be a priest of Jesus Christ, the future for your ministry may be extremely challenging.

Being a priest in these times will demand much of you. On a number of occasions, the Lord spoke clearly to his disciples about what will be their lot in following him. For instance, at the Last Supper he said, “Remember the words I said to you: a servant is not greater that his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too”. (Jn 15:20) The Lord reminded his disciples of the high standards he expected of them: they were to renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow him. (Lk 9:23)

You are being ordained on a Marian feast, the feast of our Lady of Sorrows. The Blessed Virgin Mary stood at the foot of the cross and felt a sword pierce her soul as she witnessed the death of her son.

Christians in Australia have, in the main, enjoyed acceptance and respect. For this we should be very grateful. However, there are signs that this may be changing.

The recent Australian census has revealed that religion is declining in Australia. Here in Tasmania 38% of the population claim to have no religion, the highest percentage in the country. Many, many people now live as though God does not exit. Unfortunately, this is not a benign reality. Pope St John Paul II has said that the eclipse of God will result in the eclipse of man. In other words, a darkness will come upon human society when faith in God is lost.

We are in the midst of a debate about redefining the nature of marriage. What was inconceivable ten years ago has now become a critical social question. Powerful forces have enlisted the media, many large corporations, local, state and federal politicians, and many others, to be advocates for change. The Christian voice in defence of traditional marriage has been attacked as being bigoted and hateful. There have been concerted efforts to silence the Church and deny its right to speak up in defence of marriage. We are witnessing the growth of serious intolerance of Christianity.

Paschal, you are offering your life to priestly ministry in the midst of these very worrying developments. Your years ahead will be challenging as the social climate becomes more antagonistic towards Christianity. I am sure you are aware of all this, as you present yourself to be ordained tonight.

The calling that you have sensed for many years is now formally confirmed by the Church as those responsible for your formation have testified on your behalf and I, as bishop, raise you to Sacred Orders.

Paschal, as you receive the grace of the priesthood, align your heart solely to Christ. Desire one thing and one thing only, as his priest to be a true and faithful disciple of the Master. Open your heart to him afresh tonight and say, “Here I am Lord, I have come to do your will”.

And have no fear for what may lie ahead. Your life and ministry is not your own. It is the Lord’s. It is the Lord who will inspire, guide, nourish, comfort and protect you. Have no fear.

At the Last Supper when the Lord warned his disciples of difficulties that they would encounter he said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33) Paschal, take heart, the Lord has overcome the world.

The Lord did not promise an easy path for his disciples. However, persecution is, in fact, a blessing for the Christian. In the Beatitudes the Lord taught: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. (Mt 5:10)

The Lord dwells further on this, adding that this suffering is in fact a source of joy: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”. (Mt 5:11) Persecution does not dim the hope, or discourage the spirit. Persecution becomes an impetus for joy.

Last Sunday we read at Mass about one of the prophets: the Prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel as well as being a prophet was a priest. Listen to what the Lord said to him: “Son of man, I have made you a sentry to the house of Israel”.

Paschal, part of your task as priest is to be the sentry, the lookout, the guard. As the prophet must speak words that warn and guide, so must the priest in these challenging times. The people will look to you to show them how to live under persecution. You will show them that they are to be courageous, not lose heart, and actually exhibit Christian joy.

One task of great importance that will fall to you is to present the teaching of Christ and his Church in all its fullness. At times, what you have to preach and teach will not be easy for this generation to accept. There will be the temptation to soften or compromise or remain silent.

As a priest you are to be a prophet. You are to faithfully present God’s truth revealed in Sacred Scripture and taught by the Church. The times will require priests to be very courageous as well as compassionate. Know that this is what the Lord expects of you.

Tonight is a time of great joy for you as a long journey fueled by a burning desire reaches its climax. The Church here in Tasmania rejoices in you. Embrace the wonderful gift and mystery of being a priest. Let this moment of intense grace permeate your entire being. Tonight you are changed. Tonight you become a priest, and a priest forever.

May the Lord surround you with his love and grant you fullness of his grace to be a priest after his own heart, today and always. May the Virgin Mary who stood at the foot of the cross stand always with you, especially in times of darkness and suffering.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

Friday, September 15, 2017